

HORROR OF HORRORS
SHORT SHARP SHOCKS
GRAHAM MASTERTON

I started to write horror stories at the age of 10, strongly influenced by Edgar Allan Poe and stories such as *The Cask of Amontillado*, in which a luckless fop called Fortunato is bricked up inside the wall of his friend's wine cellar, and *Hop-Frog*, in which an evil dwarf dresses up eight courtiers in orang-utan outfits, chains them together, and then hauls them up to the ceiling of a banqueting hall and sets them on fire. I was a ghoulish little boy.

Between the ages of 10 and 17 I wrote literally dozens of stories – even though some of them were only two or three pages long -- and read them out loud to my friends at school. In one of them, *Sophonisba*, a vengeful husband takes his revenge on his unfaithful wife by boiling her alive and then using her bones to decorate the front of his house. In another, a man wakes up in the morning to find that time is rapidly going backward, and that he is growing younger and younger at an ever-accelerating rate, until he becomes a baby again, and then nothing more than an egg and a sperm.

Short story writing is wonderful practice if you have any ambitions to be an author. In comparatively few words, you have to create believable characters, a convincing setting, and a plot that either has a surprising twist at the end, or else leaves your readers with some kind of unexpected insight. In a short *horror* story, of course, your protagonists also have to face some frightening or shocking fate – a fate so unusual that your readers will remember it with a shudder for the rest of their lives.

Over the years, I have continued to write short stories as a way of expressing ideas that may not be complex enough to justify an entire novel, but which are intriguing and entertaining all the same. I have published five collections – *Fortnight of Fear*, *Flights of Fear*, *Feelings of Fear*, *Faces of Fear* – soon to be followed by *Festival of Fear*, which is a collection of some of my newest stories.

Because of their simplicity, short stories are very adaptable to the screen. Several of my short stories were televised for Tony Scott's *The Hunger* series – most notably *The Secret Shih-Tan*, which starred Jason Scott Lee as a Chinese chef in search of a forbidden cookery book which was filled with gourmet recipes for cooking parts of human beings; and *Anais*, in which a lonely artist creates a nymphomaniac woman

who comes to life ... along with her furious and murderous boyfriend. *Anti-Claus* has been bought for the new US television series *Masters of Terror*. This tells the story of the “real” Santa Claus, who breaks through your roof at Christmas time and cuts off your children’s heads. If you hear the jingle of sleigh-bells ... run for your life!

One of the reasons why short stories make good television (and occasionally feature films) is because they need to be simple and very well-structured. In a full-length novel you have plenty of time and space to develop your characters and your ideas, and if you indulge yourself by waffling on a bit, it doesn’t matter too much. In my latest novel *Descendant*, which Severn House will publish this summer, I was able to explain the fascinating history of vampires in Romania, which I would not have had the luxury of doing in a short story.

Short stories are very much less forgiving than novels. The writing has to be accurate and sharp, every word has to be telling, and the basic idea has to make an immediate impact. Word for word, it is much more demanding than writing a full-length novel, and much more revealing of your strengths and weaknesses as a writer.

Many of my short stories have also been adapted as comic strips – some of the erotic stories by *Verotik*, which is published in America by Glenn Danzig (the heavy-metal rock musician who founded such bands the Misfits, Samhain and Danzig.) Fifteen other stories (including a stunning rendition of *Anais*) were interpreted by a variety of highly-talented Polish artists in a collection called *Piekielne Wizje*. This was published in Wroclaw by Mandragora and edited by Przemek Wrobel.

Occasionally I use short stories to test the boundaries of acceptability and good taste. As a former editor of *Penthouse* and *Forum* magazines, I am still very interested in the free expression of sexual topics, and short stories are a way of trying out very extreme ideas to see how far it is possible for a writer to go. After all, one doesn’t want to spend six or seven months writing a novel to be told that it cannot be published because it is too shocking.

Sometimes I admit that I have pushed the envelope a little too far. My story *Eric the Pie* was published in the first edition of a new British horror magazine called *Frighteners*, and led to the magazine being banned by one of the country’s biggest booksellers (and having to close after only its second issue). Young Eric was a nasty little cannibal who liked to hang girls up on hooks and eat their insides while they were still alive.

Sepsis is another story that comes very close to the boundaries of acceptability. A young couple are so much in love that they will do anything to show how much they adore each other ... and I mean *anything*. This was published as a special chapbook by Cemetery Dance Publishers in America, with a sinister black cover on it. I won't reveal the ending because you can read it for yourself in *Festival of Fear*.

If you fancy yourself as a horror writer, do try to write as many short stories as you can. Not only is it invaluable for honing your writing skills, it is an excellent way of getting a quick reaction from your friends and family. If it's only going to take them a matter of five or ten minutes, few people will object to reading your story and telling you what they think of it. But don't be downhearted if your readers are critical. My editors still come back to me asking for changes and alterations, and I willingly do them. It is all part of being a professional writer.

When you are trying to think of an idea for a short story, try to choose a setting that it is believable and unremarkable – maybe your own street in your own town. Try to write about ordinary people that your readers can identify with. But make their fate as original and surprising as you can.

A typical example of this technique is my story *The Burgers of Calais* in which our hero's car breaks down in a small, boring town in America. In order to pay to have it repaired, he takes a job cooking hamburgers in a fast-food restaurant. But he discovers that the hamburgers have some very disturbing ingredients...

Several motion-picture adaptations of my novels are making good progress, although so much money and organization is required to make films that you can only believe that they are eventually going to reach the screen when you are sitting in the preview theatre and actually watching them.

In my last column, I mentioned that the Italian director Mariano Baino has acquired rights in my novel *Ritual*, which he hopes to start filming in the former Yugoslav republic of Macedonia in the spring of 2006. He has chosen Macedonia because of its very strange and unusual architecture, and also because production costs will be very much more reasonable there than if he were to film it in Britain or the United States.

Mariano Baino's most impressive movie was *Dark Waters* (not to be confused with the Japanese film *Dark Water*), a horror story set in a monastery in the Ukraine which is now regarded as a classic.

Family Portrait has been optioned by Gold Circle Films in Hollywood and has a screenplay written by J.T. Petty, who also wrote *Batman Begins* and *Mimic 3*.

To end with, here is the shortest short story I have ever written. It appears in The British Fantasy Society calendar for 2006 and I was asked to write a horror story of no more than 100 words! Try to see if you can write a horror story to the same length.

A PORTRAIT OF JENNIE

He dragged the sheet off the easel.

“My God,” she gasped.

It was her, nude, with butterflies dancing around her nipples.

“Marry me, Jennie, or I promise I’ll never paint another picture.”

“John, you’re sick. You know I’m marrying Matt.”

“Jennie -- “” But she was gone.

At least he still had her likeness. But he would keep his promise. He wrapped his right hand in turpentine-soaked paint-rags, and struck a match.

Screaming, he stumbled into the painting, and set that alight, too. The butterflies flew out, their wings blazing, but spiralled to the floor, as all dreams do.

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